

# 23 exercises to transform your core

*H&H's Hannah Lemieux* is put through her paces in a quest to get her core into action for 2018

IT turns out that doing a few sit-ups doesn't cut it when it comes to strengthening our cores.

"Trainers and riders are forever talking about strengthening their 'core', but sometimes I think they misinterpret the term as just the abdominal muscles," explains Dee Holdsworth of Dynamic Sports Therapy, who works closely with both horses and riders.

"Your core includes your lower back muscles, the muscles around your pelvis and your abdominals. Most of the elite riders I

work with actually have very strong back muscles, particularly the dressage riders.

"However, we shouldn't forget the importance of flexibility too, riders must be mobile in order to get into positions and maintain them correctly. One of the jobs of a rider is to get your horse supple and it is very difficult if you struggle with this yourself."

When it comes to repetitions, the exercises should be kept to achievable bouts for each individual, says Dee — some riders will manage 10-12 reps, while others can work until fatigue sets in.

## THE PROFESSIONAL: DEE HOLDSWORTH



**BASED** in Gloucestershire, Dee set up Dynamic Sports Therapy in 2014. She has worked with top riders including Charlotte Dujardin, Paralympian Natasha Baker and Olympic eventer Astier Nicolas.

Dee works with both horse and rider, specialising in soft tissue therapy and performance, which helps to get the most out of an athlete's development.



**1 ENGAGING YOUR CORE** ◀ **FIRST** of all it's really important to establish where your core is and how to engage it properly. To do this, lie flat on your back with your knees bent and your hands under your lower back. Lift your feet off the floor, so your legs are at a 90° angle and contract your deep abdominal muscles by drawing your belly button towards the floor and flattening your back against your hands — make sure your back doesn't arch off the floor. Hold this pressure against your hands.

*'Establish where your core is and engage it'*

DEE HOLDSWORTH



## 2 LEG RAISES ON ▲ THE FLOOR

ONCE again on your back with your hands under your lower back, and keeping your legs straight, lift them off the ground as high as you can. At this point, squeeze and draw your tummy inwards and down towards the floor, creating pressure on your hands. Slowly drop your legs back down towards the floor (but not to the ground). Dee points out it's important to maintain the pressure on your hands (not arching your back) to keep the lower abdominals working hard. The slower and lower your legs go the harder those abs will have to work.



## 3 LEG RAISES WITH RESISTANCE ▲

TO make the previous exercise more advanced, and with the help of a friend (gym buddy or groom!), add some resistance. Ask your partner to stand by your head and push your legs away from them gently. Your aim is to resist the push using your abdominals.



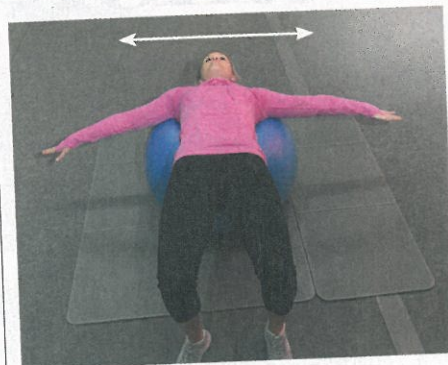
**4 REVERSE CRUNCH ▶**  
USING a bench, lie on the floor on your back holding onto the bench behind your head. Draw your belly button inwards and flatten your back, bending your knees and contracting your abdominals before bringing your knees towards your chest. Then lengthen your legs out straight again.



**5 SWISS BALL REVERSE ▲ CRUNCH**  
LIE on a Swiss ball on your back and ask your partner to stand behind you. Flatten your back against the ball, before bending your knees and bring them towards your chest and straight out again.



**6 SWISS BALL SINGLE ▲ LEG RAISE ▼**  
LIE with your back on the ball, but this time between the shoulder blades. Once the core muscles are engaged properly, you can start lifting one leg up at a time, holding the position and repeating.



**7 THE CRAB ▲**  
AGAIN on the Swiss ball, lie on your back with your arms outspread and then shuffle to one side, keeping your shoulder in contact with the ball. Go as far to the side as possible — without falling — before going back the other way. It is important to keep a good posture throughout.



**8 THE SIDE PLANK ◀**  
THIS one can easily be done at home, with no equipment required. Start by lying on the ground on your side, with your forearm on the floor. Form a straight line from

your head to your ankles — your feet and legs should be stacked on top of each other. Then raise your hips up and hold them in the air as long as possible. Add leg raises and repeat on the other side. This core exercise challenges the obliques to hold your body in place.



**10 SWISS BALL ▲ ROLL-OUT**  
IF you can survive exercise nine, have a go at this more advanced exercise. It is the same concept of resting your elbows on the Swiss ball and rolling the ball away from you and back again. However, this time you are in the plank position — on your toes as opposed to kneeling.



**11 KNEELING POINT ▲**  
ADOPT a four-point position on your hands and knees and draw your belly button in towards your spine. Lift one arm straight out in front of you and then raise the opposite leg and hold. Dee says this is beneficial to riding, particularly during flatwork, where we have to work our muscles diagonally, e.g. right leg and left rein.

**9 SWISS BALL ROLL-OUT ON KNEES ▼**  
KNEEL with your elbows resting on a Swiss ball and roll the ball forwards by straightening your arms and then back again. Maintain a good posture avoiding arching your back.



**12 SWISS BALL PRESS-UP HOLD ▶**  
WITH your legs on the Swiss ball, support yourself with both palms flat on the floor. It's important here to keep your body straight, tuck your bottom under and keep your back flat and hold. To make this exercise easier, move the ball towards your pelvis and to make it harder, move the ball towards your feet. Want to make it harder? Add leg raises to the exercise.



**13 JACK-KNIFE ▶ DOUBLE LEG**  
ONCE you feel confident with exercise 12, the press-up and hold, have a go at this one. Resting your shins and ankles on the Swiss ball, bring both knees to your chest before straightening and repeat. Want to make it harder? Again rest your shins and ankles on the Swiss ball, then lift one leg and bring your other knee towards your chest, before straightening it again. Repeat before swapping legs.





**14 STAIR CLIMB ▼**  
Only attempt this one if you can do exercise 13 comfortably. Starting in a press-up hold position, have one foot on each ball and bring one knee in towards your chest, while the other leg stays straight and then repeat on the other side.



**15 SIT-UP THROW ▼**  
THIS is another great exercise if you have a gym buddy or friend on hand. Lie with your knees bent and back on the floor, holding a medicine ball behind your head. Sit up and throw gently into your partner's hands before repeating.



**16 OBLIQUE SIT-UP THROW ▼**  
SIMILAR to exercise 15, but with added work for your obliques. Instead of taking the ball back in a straight line behind your head, take it to the left side and then repeat, taking it to the right side.



**17 GIVE-AND-RETAKE ON BOSU BALANCE TRAINER ▼**  
BOSU balance trainers are great for strengthening core muscles and improving balance. Once you have a stable stance on the Bosu, legs hip distance apart, knees slightly bent and back straight, hold the resistance band as if you were holding the reins and ask your partner to hold on to it and gently pull the band one arm at a time — as if giving and retaking each rein, all the time maintaining a stable position.



**18 RESISTANCE BAND ON BOSU IN A PAIR ▼**  
SIMILAR to exercise 17, but with both of you on Bosu trainers and using a resistance band, take turns giving and taking without losing balance.



**19 SWISS BALL THROW IN A PAIR ▼**  
KNEELING on a Swiss ball is also a great core-strengthening exercise and this particular exercise can be done once you have established kneeling with stability on the ball. Between you and your partner, take it in turns throwing a ball, always maintaining your balance by contracting your core muscles.



**20 SWISS BALL POLE IN A PAIR ▼**  
A FUN exercise to do with a friend, if you can get your hands on a pair of poles (or two yard brooms...) With both of you kneeling on a Swiss ball each and a pole in each hand, push forwards and backwards, alternating between hands.



**21 LUNGE WITH TWIST ▼**  
STANDING still, do a static lunge by stepping forward and bending your front knee, but not too much so that you can no longer see your toe. Then drop your back knee towards the floor. Keeping good alignment and holding a medicine ball, rotate your upper body towards your front bent knee, looking in the direction you have turned. It is important to keep your hips straight and facing forward, if you have a tendency to let one side drop as you rotate. Want to make it harder? Do the same exercise standing on a straight line on the floor that requires more balance, or incorporate a walking lunge.



**22 STIRRUP WITH ELASTIC BAND ▼**  
THIS is a beneficial exercise for not only engaging your core but also practising the concept of pushing weight down through the heel, i.e. the stirrups when you're riding. Lie on your back with your hands under your lower back, feet off the ground and knees bent. Using an elastic resistance band, slot your toes through and then, keeping pressure on your hands so your back doesn't arch up, push one leg away pressing down through the heel and repeat.

**23 SWISS BALL BRIDGE WITH LEG RAISES ▼**  
LIE flat on your back, with your feet resting on the Swiss ball and your arms crossed over your chest. Squeeze your bottom muscles and lift your back upwards — make sure you don't over-arch your lower back. Contract your deep abdominal muscles by squeezing your tummy towards your spine. Then, take your arms so they are by your side and again lift your back upwards and this time lift one leg off the ball, before repeating with the other leg. **H&H**

